

# **TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and of religious belief and practice, including worship. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Laws prohibit actions that incite religious hatred and violence.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy conducted outreach to various religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Orisha, and others as part of its overall efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy representatives met with religious leaders to promote religious freedom and discuss interfaith understanding and acceptance and delivered remarks at a number of religious events highlighting the importance of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 26.5 percent of the population is Protestant, including 12 percent Pentecostal or evangelical, 5.7 percent Anglican, 4.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 2.5 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.2 percent Baptist, 0.7 percent Methodist, and 0.3 percent Moravian. An additional 21.6 percent is Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists), who represent 5.7 percent of the population, and the Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African spiritualism and Christianity, at 0.9 percent. According to the census, 2.2 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, 11.1 percent does not state a religious affiliation, and 7.5 percent lists its affiliation as "other," which includes a number of small Christian groups, as well as Bahais, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

The ethnic and religious composition of the two islands varies distinctly. On Trinidad, those of African descent make up 32 percent of the population and are predominantly Christian, with a small Muslim community concentrated in and around Port of Spain, along the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad, and in certain areas of central and south Trinidad. Those of East Indian descent comprise

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37 percent of the population, roughly half of whom are Hindu, in addition to some Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics. The population of Tobago is 85 percent African descent and predominantly Christian.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and of religious belief and observance, including worship. It recognizes the existence of basic fundamental human rights and freedoms without discrimination by reason of religion.

The law prohibits acts of sedition and seditious intent, defined as engendering or promoting feelings of ill will towards, hostility to, or contempt for any class of inhabitants, including on the basis of religion.

A fine of up to 1,000 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (TT) (\$156) may be levied for expressions of hatred directed specifically against a person's religion, including any "riotous, violent, indecent, or disorderly behavior in any place of divine worship," or attacks, ridicule, or vilification of another person's religion in a manner likely to provoke a breach of the peace.

Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination. An anti-blasphemy law is not enforced.

To receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, or to perform marriages, religious groups must register with the government, which requires them to demonstrate they are nonprofit organizations. To register, groups must be in operation for at least one year, and must submit a request for charitable status to the Ministry of Finance and the Economy. The request must include a certificate or articles of incorporation, the constitution and bylaws of the organization, and the most recently audited financial statements. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of their registration status. They may, for example, own land and hire employees, and are likewise liable for property taxes and government-mandated employee benefits.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools, allocating time each week during which any religious group with an adherent in the school may provide an instructor at the parents' request. Attendance at these classes is

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voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. The law states no persons shall be refused admission to any public school on account of their religious beliefs, and no child shall be required to attend any religious observance or receive instruction in religious subjects as a condition of admission or continued attendance in a public school. While parents may enroll their children in religiously affiliated private schools as an alternative to public education, the law does not permit homeschooling.

Missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry visas and must represent a registered religious group. Permits are valid for a maximum period of three years, at a cost of TT 500 (\$78) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit, but may re-enter after a year's absence.

### Government Practices

The government financially supported activities of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), an interfaith coordinating committee representing the major religious groups. Leaders from five faiths (Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Orisha, and Bahai) delivered the invocations at government-sponsored events, including the opening of parliament and the annual court term. According to the IRO president, the government maintained its previous levels of engagement with and financing of religious organizations during the year.

Members of the government often participated in ceremonies and holidays of various religious groups, regularly emphasizing religious tolerance and harmony. Government officials from both sides of the political spectrum routinely spoke publicly against religious intolerance. Former Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar issued public messages at Ramadan, Easter, and Corpus Christi, underscoring religious freedom. Her 2015 Eid message said, "We realize that we cannot afford to sit idly by and let greed, selfishness, ingratitude, corruption and intolerance permeate our beloved nation." Newly elected Prime Minister Keith Rowley chose Diwali as the occasion for his first official function, and in his remarks encouraged the nation to use the positive message of the festival to strengthen "peace, justice, and unity" in the country.

The government provided the National Council of Indian Culture a grant of TT \$1.5 million (\$234,230) to help defray costs of Diwali celebrations.

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The government subsidized religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups.

The government continued to limit the number of foreign missionaries whose stays in the country exceeded 30 days to 35 per registered religious group at any given time as a matter of Ministry of National Security administrative policy. Some international religious groups or denominations reportedly maintained more than 35 missionaries in the country if they were affiliated with more than one registered group, including nonprofit groups and charities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy conducted outreach to various religious groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy representatives met with leaders of various religious organizations and visited a number of religious sites.

The embassy hosted a roundtable to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance between nonmember and member representatives of the IRO.

The embassy hosted an iftar during which the Charge d'Affaires, and the president of the largest Muslim association delivered remarks highlighting the value of religious freedom and the country's role as an example of religious diversity and tolerance.

Embassy staff regularly met with Muslim religious and civil society leaders for discussions including religious understanding and acceptance. Embassy staff also continued working with religious groups, such as the Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association, the country's largest Muslim organization, and delivered remarks on religious freedom at conventions of the Trinidad Muslim League and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.